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COMPOSITION AS A TRAINING IN THOUGHT

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Visitors in high-school English classes must have noticed a divergence between theory and practice. Almost any English teacher, in naming the objects of composition work, would mention among others training in thought. Asked to specify how this training is to be derived, he might stammer out answers somewhat vague. Observed in his classroom, he will be found to devote almost the whole time to quite different matters. He has in the hurly-burly of the street car or the quiet of his study very conscientiously and inartistically variegated the hastily written themes of his pupils with symbols in red or blue; you are fascinated by a prominent and even conspicuous "sp" opposite the word "recieve," or by a monstrous "p," apparently jabbed down in vexation of spirit, opposite the end of a clause or sentence. Perhaps the compositions are read in class; he notices certain infelicities in diction, advising the substitution of "maintain" for "claim." Perhaps, if he be very much alive to current tendencies, the period is devoted to oral composition; he then insists on the pupil's saying "does not" for fear the youngster will slip into "don't."

Now all this effort to remove the errors from written and spoken English is undoubtedly necessary. More than that, the time will never come when vigilance over the diction of our pupils can be relaxed. But to confine the student's attention to such features is to miss one of the chief values in composition. It fails to provide training in thought. There is no defense in saying that the mere use of language is evidence of thinking. To say that high-school pupils employ language to conceal thought is too flattering. A very good teacher not long ago received from a fourth-year boy a theme on baseball which strongly resembled an article on the national sport in one of the current magazines. The boy, when interrogated, replied, "I know the language is some classy, but I can write some classy when I wantter." But even if the ingenious

youth had not borrowed his ideas and much of his phraseology from the periodical, there is little probability that he would have done any thinking on the subject. Immediate expression of ideas is fatal to thinking. It is only when ideas are turned over in the pupil's mind, the reasons for holding them at all sought out, their relative value determined, that there is any real thinking.

This reflective attitude is exactly the disposition which all intellectual training should strive to develop. If English composition does not foster in the student, besides care for grammatical correctness in expression, a habit of following up and testing the ideas that are suggested by the topics on which he writes, then English composition is falling short of what it should accomplish. For the high-school boy, as at least every student of education knows, is forming his habits of thought for life. If he slaps down the first thing that pops into his mind during this adolescent period, there is no guaranty that in later periods he will not in both action and thought be guided by caprice or the circumstances of the moment or the unconsidered impulses of appetite. If his writing now is made to build up habits of keen observation and logical inference, there is ground for hope that he will throughout life base his beliefs and acts on something more than mere guess-work and hearsay opinion.

Some ways in which composition may be made to serve this end without detriment to the other aims of writing may be briefly illustrated. In a class of the first year the subject, "What I Should Consider besides Pay in Accepting a Position," is proposed. A short oral discussion may be necessary in the assignment to start the ideas of the boys. They will suggest that such considerations as the kind of work, the character of the employer, the chances for advancement, the distance of the office or factory from home are essential. The pupils are then required to arrange these and any other topics that occur to them so that the item which for them is the weightiest will come at the end. This is the old principle of climax, but not in its usual Procrustean form. In treating each topic the boy is required to give the reasons why that consideration is for him important. The next morning the results will be various. Some Lilliputian, about four feet five inches in height and weighing

nearly seventy-six pounds, will gravely declare that he would prefer not to have too much heavy work, such as piano-moving, since it might make him tired before the end of the day. But there is certain to be lively discussion of the reasons for putting any subject last. The opinions will be various, but it will be found that each boy has some reasons of his own to support his arrangement. He has done some thinking.

From a fourth-year class more can be expected. The subject, "My Qualifications for the Profession of Medicine," may be proposed. Coming, as it most profitably will, in a series of vocational themes, it will carry with it suggestions for attacking the problem. At any rate, do not insist on having a paragraph or section each for physical, mental, and moral characteristics or qualifications. Such imposing of adult logic and classification on the growing mind does more harm than good. The boy will probably work his qualifications out in some such manner as this: first, because he has steady nerves and can go without sleep when necessary; second, because in his high-school course he has always been most interested in biology and chemistry and like courses; third, because in his summer camping he has always carried peroxide of hydrogen, court-plaster, and sanitary bandages, and has taken great glee in treating the blisters and bruises among the boys in his house or tent. This may be accompanied by an outline, in which the various ranks of ideas are indicated by the precisely right use of Roman and Arabic numerals, if the teacher wish to exact such detail. The essential feature is that the student be made to show that each of these is a qualification, and how, and that he be able to defend the order in which he treats the topics. That is, he must be held responsible for the consecutiveness of his ideas.

The same effort to form habits of careful and orderly thinking may be applied to themes drawn from literature. Let us suppose that a third-year class is engaged upon the *De Coverley Papers*. The pupils come to the account of Will Wimble. The problem is proposed, "Do such characters as Will Wimble exist in America today?" A boy arises and in an oral theme, or one that is written if it suit better the habits of the teacher, develops the idea that the sons of the idle rich in our country are very similar to the English

character. A second boy rises eagerly to riddle the argument. He maintains that the first speaker has not attended to the prime essential in the comparison, that he has not shown what characteristics Will Wimble possesses. He makes good the fault by pointing out the feeling of the disgrace of work as the chief trait of the Englishman. He then argues that Americans, no matter how wealthy, never feel that they should not work if they want to. A third boy, who is asked to take sides with one of the two, tells of an acquaintanceship he formed in another school with a boy of wealthy parents which makes him think the second boy is right. Another, who has been much interested in history, explains the reason for the difference by dwelling on the existence of the law of primogeniture in England and the long traditions of the landed gentry. This discussion may seem mature for a secondary school, but it is as a matter of fact the actual course of development in an oral discussion among fifth-form pupils in a New York high school.

These illustrations should make clear what is meant by saying that composition may be used to train thought. And when it is used to train thought it affords a more general preparation for later living than is provided by exclusive attention to matters of spelling and other points of usage. For one thing, the writing has not been about subjects too far above the smoke and stir of this dim spot that men call earth. On the contrary, the same situations or problems that have engaged his attention in the classroom must later in office or factory be faced with similar trains of reasoning. More important, the high-school student thus trained has formed habits of scrutinizing more carefully the grounds for his beliefs and of watching more closely the ordering of his ideas. He should therefore be better able to determine whether he would rather prepare briefs in a lawyer's office or furnish the women of the land with appropriate calicoes and silks. He should more intelligently decide whether he wishes a protective tariff for the nation or a tax on billboards in his native town. In short, he will not only dictate a clearer business letter or draw up a more orderly report, but he will display a more intelligent attitude toward all matters of discussion. He should be more successful in his vocation and more helpful as a citizen.